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IF CIVILIZATIONS COUNT. . . SO WHAT?

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What ultimately counts for people is not political ideology or economic interest. Faith and family, blood and belief, are what people identify with and what they will fight and die for.¹

With the end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the simple division of nations into free, communist and third world lost its straight forward validity. In what may be described as a crisis of confidence born of the lack of a paradigm to describe the new world order, social scientists began casting around for alternative explanations to describe new relationships. One group propounded an optimistic view of a world becoming ever more modern and western. As the economic fortunes of nations steadily improved, they predicted states would grow increasingly secular, democratic and integrated into a universal civilization based upon commonly accepted western values.²

This contrasted sharply with a far more pessimistic view of the future of international relations. Robert Kaplan articulated an almost apocalyptic vision in a 1994 Atlantic Monthly article in which he described a world increasingly divided between the haves and the have nots. The picture Kaplan painted was of a wealthy first world in fortress nations besieged by an increasingly desperate people from an impoverished Third and Fourth world. In the world of the have nots, nation-states were

¹Samuel Huntington, "If Not Civilizations, What?" Foreign Affairs, 72.5, November/December 1993: 194.

²Robert L. Bartley, "The Case for Optimism," Foreign Affairs, 72.4, September/October 1993: 17

disintegrating as their populations' existence was degenerating to the condition of near animals.³

Samuel Huntington stepped into this debate about the future with a new paradigm postulating an ongoing and intensifying clash of civilizations. In his controversial 1993 article, "The Clash of Civilizations," he stated that:

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.⁴

While he stated several times that states would remain the principal actors, he noted that they would increasingly define their interests in terms of civilizational issues. He identified eight major civilizations that he believed would be the principal forces in the future. These include: Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic/Orthodox, Latin American, and African.⁵ In the interest of brevity, this paper will discuss four civilizations: Western, Orthodox, Islamic and Confucian.

Huntington's paradigm created a firestorm of controversy throughout the world as political scientists published articles

³Robert Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," Atlantic Monthly, February 1994: 44-76.

⁴Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" Foreign Affairs 72.3, Summer 1993: 22.

⁵Huntington, "Clash" 24-25.

critiquing the efficacy of "The Clash of Civilizations." While these critiques are of some interest from a purely academic standpoint, their criticisms of specific points of supporting evidence miss the key issue. Huntington answered his critics with the question, "If not civilizations, what?" However, for the policy maker, a better question and the key issue would be, "If civilizations count, so what?"

The answer is that the civilizational paradigm can aid the strategic planner and policy maker in identifying long term challenges to vital U.S. interests and provide direction for policies to preclude potentially deadly conflicts. This paper proceeds from the assumption that Huntington's model has validity. Using it as a paradigm, it examines the nature of civilizations, the types of conflicts that the world can expect in the future, and how civilizational differences might impact on vital U.S. interests in those potential conflicts.

Huntington defines a civilization as ". . . the highest grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species."⁵ While civilizations are dynamic, shifting in nature, strength, and size over time, they nonetheless have certain common objective elements. These elements include language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and subjective self-identification of the people involved.⁷

⁵Huntington, "Clash," 24.

⁷Huntington, "Clash," 24-25

At the moment, Western Civilization, with the United States as its leading nation, is the dominant civilization in the world. Based on the secular nation state and the importance of individual liberty and democracy, Westerners tend to believe and act on the theory that modernization, out of necessity, will bring with it the virtues of westernization. As the sole current superpower in the dominant civilization, the United States has been able to effectively employ numerous elements of statecraft such as economic resources, military power and international institutions to shape world events to promote Western political and economic values.³

However, within the United States, there has been a growing phenomenon to marginalize the importance of Western Civilization and view the American experience through the eyes of a non European multicultural window. The extent of this movement led James Kurth in an article in The National Interest to raise the question: "Most practically, who will believe in it [Western Civilization] enough to fight, kill, and die for it in a clash of civilizations?"⁹ This becomes an important question when the United States has repeatedly articulated its interests as including the promotion of freedom, democracy and human rights (basic tenets of its civilization) throughout the world .

This has occurred at the same time that analysts throughout

³Huntington, "Clash," 40.

⁹James Kurth, "The Real Clash," The National Interest, 37 Fall 1994: 15.

the world have come to question the validity of Western Civilization as a model for their countries. A growing trend, particularly in the Middle East and Asia, has been the desire to modernize without westernizing. Kishore Mahbubani, a senior Singaporean diplomat, has written extensively on the failings of Western society. Blaming the West's core principles of individualism and freedom for its social decay, he cites numerous failings. Key among these are lack of budgetary discipline, increased social programs, low savings rate and an eroding work ethic leading to a decline in competitiveness.¹⁰ He also contends that the West, and particularly the United States, has taken the concept of individual liberty to a self destructive extreme. Mahbubani recommends the West look to the East, particularly the Asian Tigers, with their civilizations based on the Confucian model to solve its problems of civilizational decay.¹¹ But it is not just the Tigers of East Asia who are rejecting the West during their attempts to modernize. India as well as several Islamic nations have strong movements by numerous peoples within those civilizations to modernize without westernizing.¹²

This rejection of the idea of a universal civilization in

¹⁰Kishore Mahbubani, "The Dangers of Decadence" Foreign Affairs, 72.4, September/October 1993: 14

¹¹Kishore Mahbubani, "The United States: "Go East, Young Man," The Washington Quarterly, 17 2 5-23

¹²Iqbal Singh, Personal Interview, 7 February 1995 and Bard O'Neill, Personal Interview, 7 February 1995

general, and Western norms in particular, could impact on the interaction of the United States with other nations. Conflicts might occur at two levels. At the macro level, states compete for relative military and economic power; control of institutions; third party clients as well as in promotion of political and religious views. At the micro level these general issues can erupt into conflicts for control of territory and groups of people.¹³

Huntington cites eight civilizations and a myriad of internal and border conflicts to support his paradigm. However, these controversies only become relevant to the United States if they have the potential to affect U.S. interests. While the definition of specific interests is situationally dependent, the United States has consistently defined its interests based on three primary concerns: security of the nation; economic prosperity; and promotion of its ideology (taken for purposes of this essay as secular, Western, democratic values). It is to further these interests that, to varying degrees, the United States would employ the military, economic and political elements of statecraft.

To determine if U.S. interests are affected by civilizational clashes, it is necessary to examine potential civilizational encounters on a situational basis. Since the most basic requirement of any state is to provide for its own survival, the fundamental issue for U.S. policy planners is

¹³Huntington, "Clash," 29

identifying and countering any threats to its survival. As a residual from the Cold War nuclear standoff, the Orthodox Civilization under Russian leadership, with its huge arsenal of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them poses the greatest potential challenge. Although such an arsenal has the capability to threaten the physical security of the United States, it appears that current Russian intentions and actions are reducing the near term threat. Nonetheless, this potential security threat from a major nation state will remain, for the foreseeable future, a major consideration in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.

However, for the Orthodox Civilization the most immediate conflicts are along its borders with the Islamic world. From Bosnia in the West, to Chechnya and Azerbaijan in the South, to Tajikistan in the East, the Orthodox world is engaged in bitter disputes with states and non-state actors representing Islamic Civilization. Although these confrontations involve peoples from two contending civilizations, they are largely regional disputes. Only the Bosnian conflict has involved the United States in even a supporting manner. This American interest is primarily due to the conflict's potential to destabilize NATO - the western security bulwark. In Bosnia, the Russians have supported the Serbs, their Orthodox ally, while the United States has backed NATO intervention, mainly to help the Bosnian Muslims.

Islamic instability and conflict is not confined to the periphery of the Orthodox Civilization. Rather, confrontation

arises at almost every point Islam comes into contact with another civilization. Additionally, Islamic nations themselves suffer the internally destabilizing effects of extremism. For example, in Africa, the bloody civil wars of the Sudan and Chad pit the forces of Islam against those of the African tradition. In South Asia, the Islamic nation of Pakistan continues to fight a territorial conflict over Kashmir with the Hindu nation of India.

When confronting Western Civilization, Islam challenges all three fundamental U.S. interests. As a security threat in both Europe and the United States, Islamic terrorists engage in calculated acts of violence against the states representing Western Civilization. In the ideological realm, a sharp divide exists between the theocratic authoritarianism preached in the mosque and the secular individualism supported by the United States. Most importantly, economically, the United States and Western Civilization are totally dependent on Islamic oil to fuel their economies.

These potential threats by an apparent "monolithic" and often extremist Islamic Civilization have grabbed world wide news coverage. On the surface, Islam appears to be emerging as the replacement for Communism as a challenge to U.S. interests. However, closer examination shows the majority of violence and conflict involving the Islamic world has as its basis local territorial/ethnic disputes; has been internal in nature; or conducted as random acts by individual groups or states. Despite

Islamic rhetoric, no single Moslem state currently possesses the requisite moral authority combined with economic, physical, demographic and military resources to pose a serious threat to the security or ideological interests of the United States.¹⁴

The greatest threat to U.S. interests from the Islamic world is the continuing vulnerability of western economies to interruptions in the oil supply. Economically, the effectiveness of the oil embargoes of the 1970s demonstrated the devastating impact these nations can have if they can adopt a coordinated policy. However, Arab investment of petrodollars in Western economies may mitigate the potential use of oil as a weapon.

The single major civilization which Islam does not appear in conflict with is the Confucian Civilization of China. At two major areas of contact, Pakistan and Indonesia, the two civilizations appear to be mutually supportive. The Moslem Indonesians have become one of the ASEAN Tigers based on the Asian model of limited freedom and economic development. Additionally, the Chinese have provided the Pakistanis, a second major Islamic state, with military support in the Pakistanis' conflict with India - a state which both countries border. A combination of the Islamic and Confucian Civilizations building on the mutual interests of China, Pakistan and Indonesia could provide a severe challenge to Western Civilization.

However, even alone, China presents the United States with the greatest current and potential challenge to U.S. national

¹⁴Bard O'Neill, Personal Interview, 7 February 1995

interests. Militarily, China already has nuclear weapons, delivery means and a large standing Army. This capability is being further developed and could be directed against the United States with a change in the intentions of the leadership. Given the advanced of its current leader, Deng Xiaoping, the imminent change in leadership must be closely monitored by the United States for any changes in intentions.

Ideologically, the Chinese have always viewed their civilization as the Middle Kingdom around which the world rotated. With their emergence as a growing economic force, more nations are turning to China as a model for economic growth at the expense of freedom. This has resulted in decreased American leverage within China on human rights issues. Additionally, Confucian based nations such as Singapore have begun criticizing the U.S. emphasis on individual freedom at the expense of order.

Most significantly, according to World Bank projections of economic growth, the Chinese economy will become the largest in the world within 25 years - outstripping the United States by 40%. Presenting an even greater challenge, seven of the ten leading world economies will be from Asia.¹⁵ If these nations follow the lead of the Chinese Civilization to the exclusion of the West, the United States may face serious challenges to its economic interests in the largest market and most powerful region of the world.

Economic competition has already begun to ignite tensions

¹⁵"The Global Economy," The Economist, October 1, 1994, 4.

between the United States and China. On February 4, 1995, U.S. Trade Representative Mickey Kantor announced over \$1 billion in trade sanctions against China for intellectual property rights violations. China immediately retaliated. A major trade war between the first and third largest economies in the world has already begun.

Although only examining four of Huntington's eight civilizations, the above discussion illustrates that such an approach has both advantages and drawbacks for the policy maker. While states may have a civilizational affinity for one another, this does not guarantee that, absent a dominant leader, they will work together to advance their civilizational interests against another civilization. As the numerous conflicts in the Islamic world point out, most nations primary interests and conflicts tend to be internal and localized. Based on this observation, as long as Islam remains fragmented, its potential as a serious threat to any U.S. interests will be minimal. The challenge for the United States will be to monitor development of individual Islamic nations insuring that they do not ally with other nations to pose a unified opposition to U.S. interests.

The civilizations which pose the greatest potential threat to the United States coalesce around a single dominant nation state. Here, China, with its extant military; growing economy and ethnocentric world view, will present the most significant policy challenge to the United States in the future. As a large, relatively cohesive major power surrounded by smaller powers,

many with significant populations of ethnic Chinese, the Middle Kingdom provides a viable alternative to Western Civilization. Many nations may naturally look to Beijing for leadership in their efforts to modernize without westernizing. The test for the United States will be to adapt to the growth of Chinese power and influence.

Clearly, the United States must recognize civilizational influence and its impact on the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. However, the best way to do so remains engagement with individual nation-states. Within civilizations such as Islam without a dominant power, the United States can continue to pursue its interests relatively freely. However, in civilizations where a dominant power is emerging, such as the Confucian Civilization of China, the challenge will be to work with the dominant power. This may mean compromising total accomplishment of U.S. national interests or use of old fashioned balance of power diplomacy with other states to counteract the dominant power.

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